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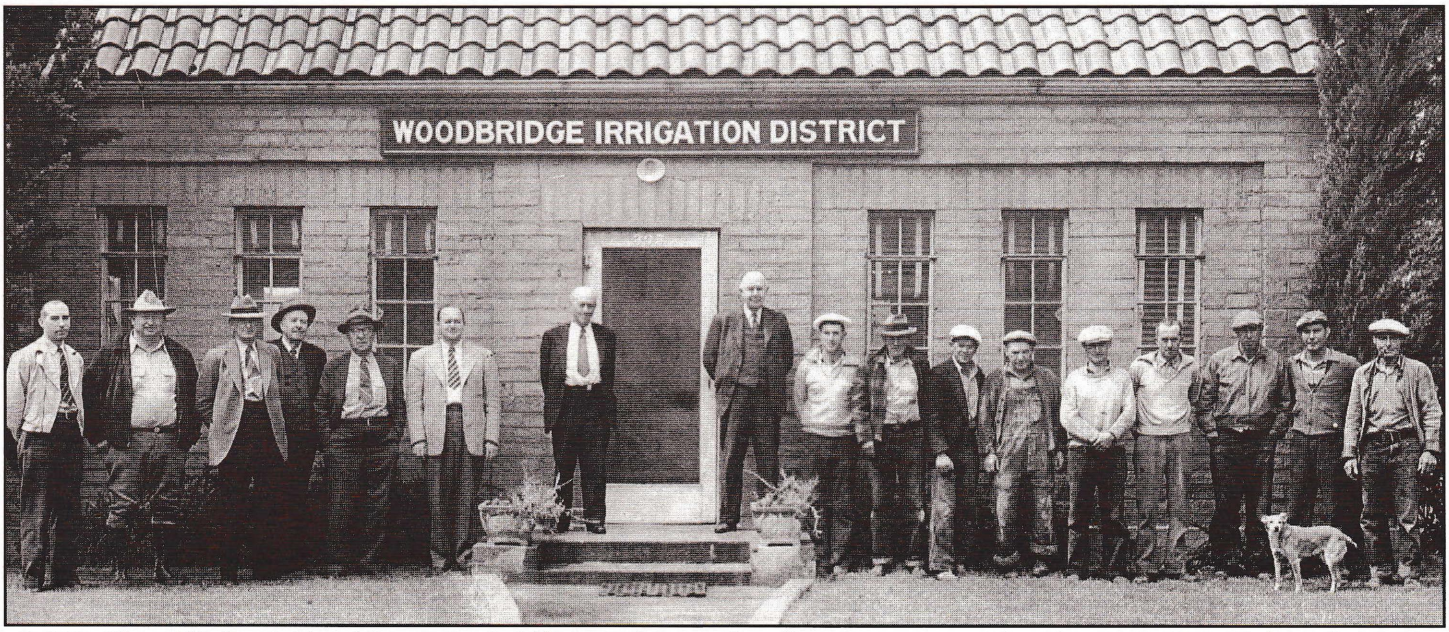
WOODBRIDGE IRRIGATION & DAMS

by Ralph Lea & Janice Roth



▲ *WID Office, 1938. (l to r): Elwood Stewart, Frank Goldman, Neal Swain, Elmer Shinn, Ernest Stewart, Ed Vandiver, Fenton Ham, Fred Cowell, Kenneth Walsh, T. Rouse, Howard Roberts, Mr. Longmire, Buck Longmire, Jack Hall, John Herren, Earl Edgecomb and Bill Truesdell.*

The early pioneers of the Lodi-Woodbridge area were well aware of how useful a dam on the Mokelumne River would be to farm crops that needed water in the summer months when rain was almost nonexistent.

Sylvester Tredway, David Kettelman, B. F. Langford, H. C. Sargent and others formed the Mokelumne Ditch & Irrigation Company in 1875 to build a dam at Westmoreland, between what is now Pardee and Comanche Dams. Opposition forces stopped this project but not the idea.

Byron De La Beckwith moved to Mokelumne (Lodi) in 1870 and started the first drug store. He also became postmaster. After twelve years Beckwith sold the drug business, building and post office to Robert L. Graham.

In 1886 Byron Beckwith posted notice in New Hope (Thornton) and Woodbridge claiming 150,000 cubic inches per second of Mokelumne River. The claim was recorded December 31, 1886, in Book 6 of San Joaquin County and the water was appropriated. He posted a second claim at Woodbridge for an additional 150,000 inches under four inch pressure.

Allen T. Covell arrived in Woodbridge in 1887 and acquired land. Covell had worked in the gold mines, but soon moved to San Leandro where he became a civil engineer. His first job was to establish a Fresno County Irrigation Colony.

Later Beckwith hired A. T. Covell to engineer the canal system for the new Woodbridge Canal & Irrigation Company. One branch of the canal ran west while the main branch headed south for ten miles to the Calaveras River. Benjamine A. Laws was enlisted to build twenty-four miles of canals plus a timber dam at Woodbridge just north of the headgate.

On April 27, 1889, the Woodbridge Canal & Irrigation Company was incorporated with 300,000 shares of stock being offered at $1.00 per share. Beckwith, Covell and Law also sold bonds to finance the construction. Then they sold their interest to the new corporation.

▲ *On the left in 1952, long-time Superintendent Kenneth S. Welsh with the district's 1934 International flatbed. (Man in truck and to the right are unknown.)*

The directors of the new corporation were Watson, Greene, Beckwith, Laws and Creighton.

In 1891 the canals and the wooden dam were completed and on November 12th nearly 3,000 people attended a huge barbecue at 1:00 p.m. and then marched to the headgates of the canal where Byron Beckwith, founder, opened the gates which turned the river water into the canals for the first time.

The high water in the spring of 1895 caused the Woodbridge Dam to give way. Hasty efforts to divert the urgently needed irrigation water included a temporary brushwood dam and a steam driven pump. Pilings from the first timber dam may still be seen at low water just north of the present head gate.

A second wood dam was built closer to the present site. That operation failed financially. In August of 1898 a foreclosure sale sold all of the property, water rights and titles of the Woodbridge Canal and Irrigation Company for $22,000 to W. D. Buckley and the Stockton & Mokelumne Canal Company of which E. L. Wilhoit and George F. Buck were principles.

The new group incorporated and used pumps to extract 56 cfs (cubic feet per second) into canals. G. A. Atherton, Civil Engineer designed a new wood dam that was

▲ *Celebrating the opening of the headgate and dam of the new Woodbridge Canal and Irrigation Company, November 12, 1891.*

▲ *Fishermen were on their own at this early wooden Woodbridge dam.*

built in 1901 at a cost of $25,000 on an improved location of hardpan and clay where the present dam is located.

In 1901 the pile driver crew at work on the new dam encountered the remains of two boats at the dam site. One was the old ferry boat of Jeremy Woods, founder of Woods Ferry, lying ten feet under the sand. The other was a larger San Francisco boat which sunk at this spot in 1858. Holes were driven through the remains of the two boats whose presence served to strengthen the dam.

The new organization was formed as a public utility with Charles A. Kelly as head. In 1910 a new concrete dam was constructed by engineer H. H. Henderson on the original redwood piles of the dam designed by Atherton at a cost of $40,549. Three years later concrete headgate controls replaced the wood.

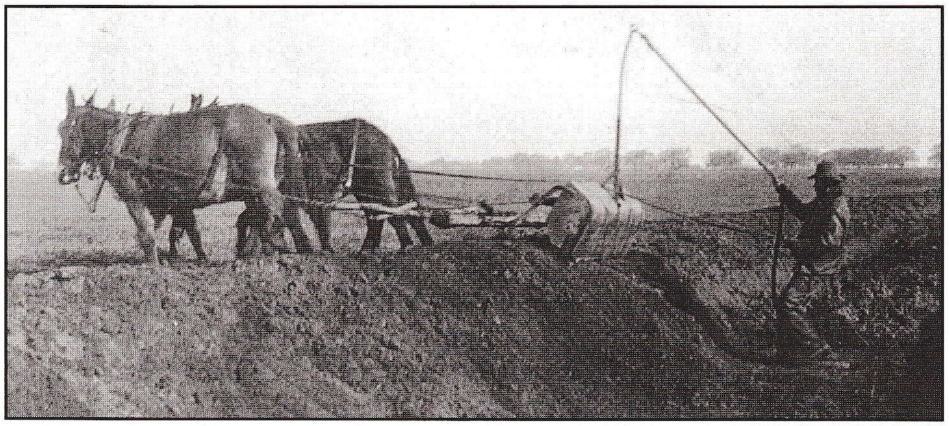
The years from 1911 to 1924 were plagued by high waters caused by extensive snow run-off during the early spring, while by August the flow in the Mokelumne River diminished to almost nothing.

There was no large dam upstream to spread out the run-off, only a small reservoir at Blue Lakes in the High Sierras. As dry years occurred, those farmers attempting to irrigate crops from the canals would at times panic. The Stockton & Mokelumne Canal Company was destined to fail for lack of water and revenues.

The leaders of the farm community realized in the early 1920's that a water district, a political subdivision would have to be formed to irrigate clover, vineyards and orchards that were dry farmed in deep sandy soils. However many farmers felt that they could continue to survive without ditch irrigation for grain crops and dry pasture.

It was common knowledge that the East Bay Municipal Utility District was planning to build a dam (Pardee) on the Mokelumne River that might absorb all the river flow.

On June 16, 1924 the Woodbridge Irrigation District (WID) was formed by W.J. Robinson, E.J. Shinn, J.E. Stewart, R.N. Blossom, Emerson Herrick, L.J. Lucas and others. A.L. Cowell was the attorney and Charles H. Widdows was appointed engineer.



▲ *Three mules and a Fresno scraper build the WID ditches.*

▲ *Most of the canals & ditches were just soil in the beginning; lots of hand labor & here comes the water.*

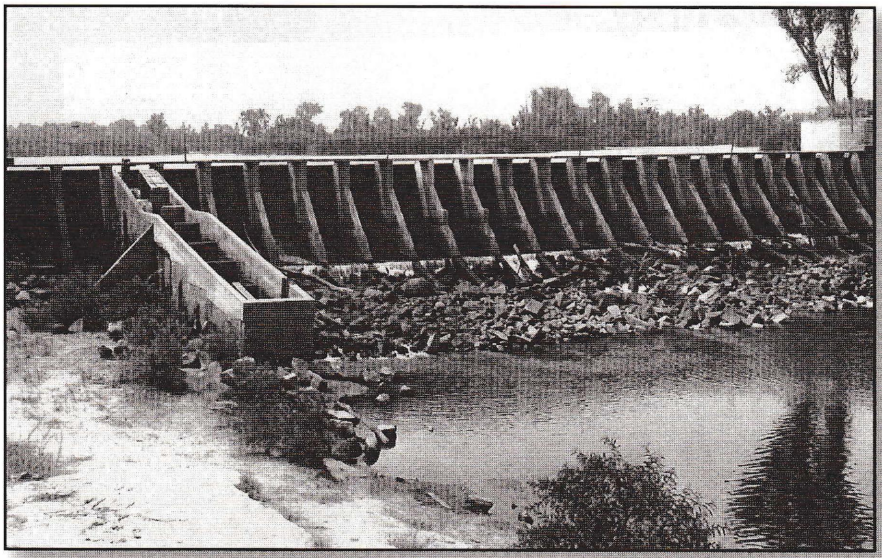
The proposed district was for 30,000 acres but only about 8,000 acres voted for the bonding project amounting to $325,000 for water rights and rights of way.

After many months of effort an additional 6,000 acres were included with farmers signing up for five years

▲ *Building laterals for each farm.*

▲ *Adding the boards each spring at Woodbridge dam.*

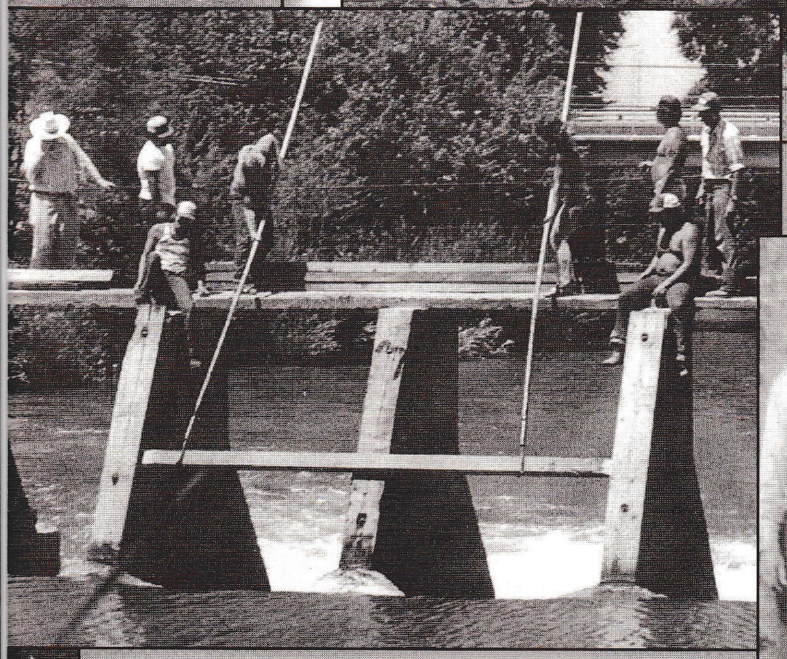
▲ *Placing culverts for the main canal crossing of Turner Road, just west of Lower Sacramento Road.*



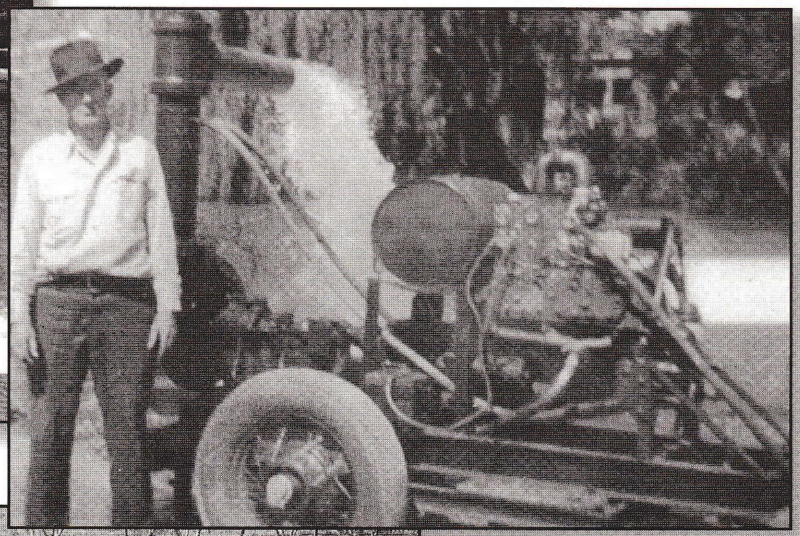
▲ *Woodbridge Dam, 1944; the boards are in the dam and there is very little water for the fish ladder.*

▲ *Water under the Woodbridge Road in 1950.*

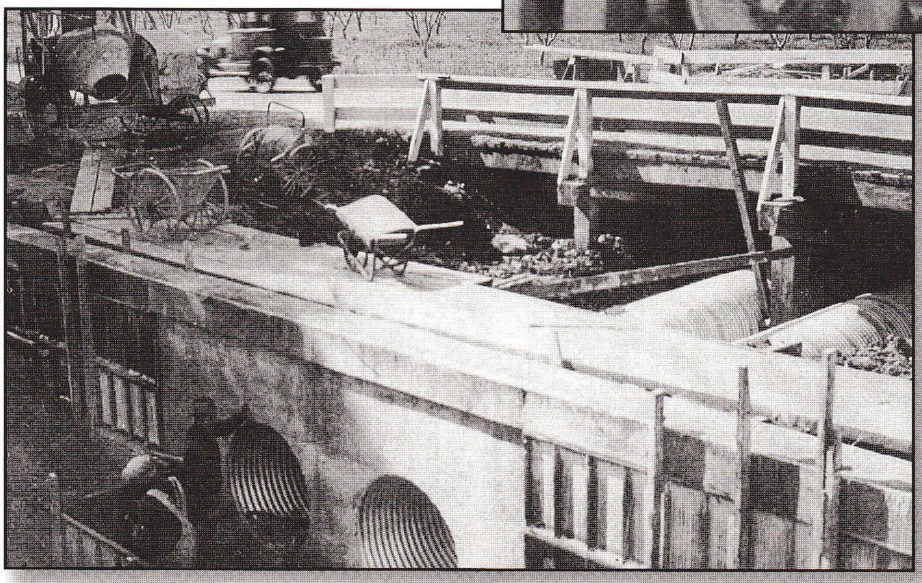
This WID employee had to improvise to keep the manhole cover in place. ▲



▲ Removing the boards each fall, the circus has nothing on the WID employees.



Frank Edson of Woodbridge ▲ rented pumps to the public and to the WID.



◀ Finally, using concrete for another canal road crossing.

▲ *The flood of 1907 did quite a lot of damage to the road at Woodbridge; W.H. Thompson on the left.*

at $1.25 an acre. On May 13, 1927 the lands were pledged and accepted by the state securities commission. The next month Engineer Widdows submitted his report that, while the dam and headgates of the canal company were in first class condition, most of the redwood check gates and laterals were in a very sad state of neglect.

A bond election was held on March 4, 1928 and passed with over a 2/3 vote. The WID purchased the Stockton Mokelumne Canal Company for $246,000 on April 18, 1928. Operations began and during its first year 4,089 acres were successfully irrigated. In the meantime the Pardee Dam had been constructed and began to store water in March of 1929 and was filled by May of the following year.

WID irrigated 8,166 acres the second year with most of the increase coming through the Pardee Dam summer discharge gates.

In May of 1930 a house warming Open House was held by the WID officials to celebrate the opening of their new office building. This two-room fireproof structure, containing a concrete vault, was built at a total cost of $2,500. Hosting the event were W.J. Robinson, president; Olla Strothers, secretary; M.F. Ham, assessor-collector; Frank Davis, engineer; E.J. Shinn and H.E. Stewart, directors.

E.J. Strothers, superintendent and his wife Olla Strothers, secretary, in office since 1928 resigned in 1936. E.J. Strothers was succeeded by W.J. Robinson as superintendent.

▲ *Woodbridge flood, March 26, 1907; bridge over main canal at the headgate.*

The city of Lodi and the WID had legal problems right from the start of purchasing the canal system. The city had been discharging the sanitary sewage into the canal since 1910 and in 1921 made another contract for the additional right to dump storm waters into the canal. By 1929 the conditions were so bad that WID sued the City of Lodi to help pay the cost of a dragline for cleaning the canals.

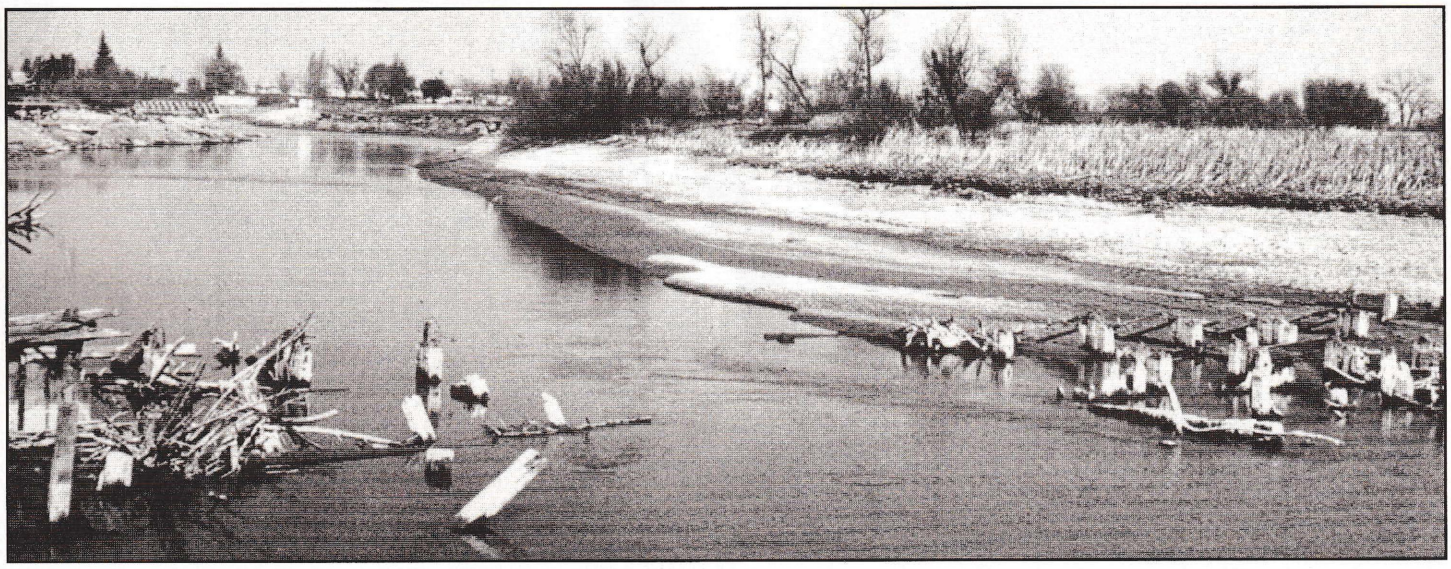
WID also had to sue the East Bay Utility Company to obtain their rightful amount of river water. Early in January of 1938 the East Bay Municipal District agreed to recognize WID's prior irrigation rights by varying the flow from 30,000 acre feet in dry years and 45,000 acre feet when the flow of the river exceeds 400,000 acre feet.

In 1947 the WID purchased 96 acres of land east of the dam for storage (Knights Lake). The next year WID applied for 30 cfs diversion from Beaver Slough and installed two 25 horse power pumps.

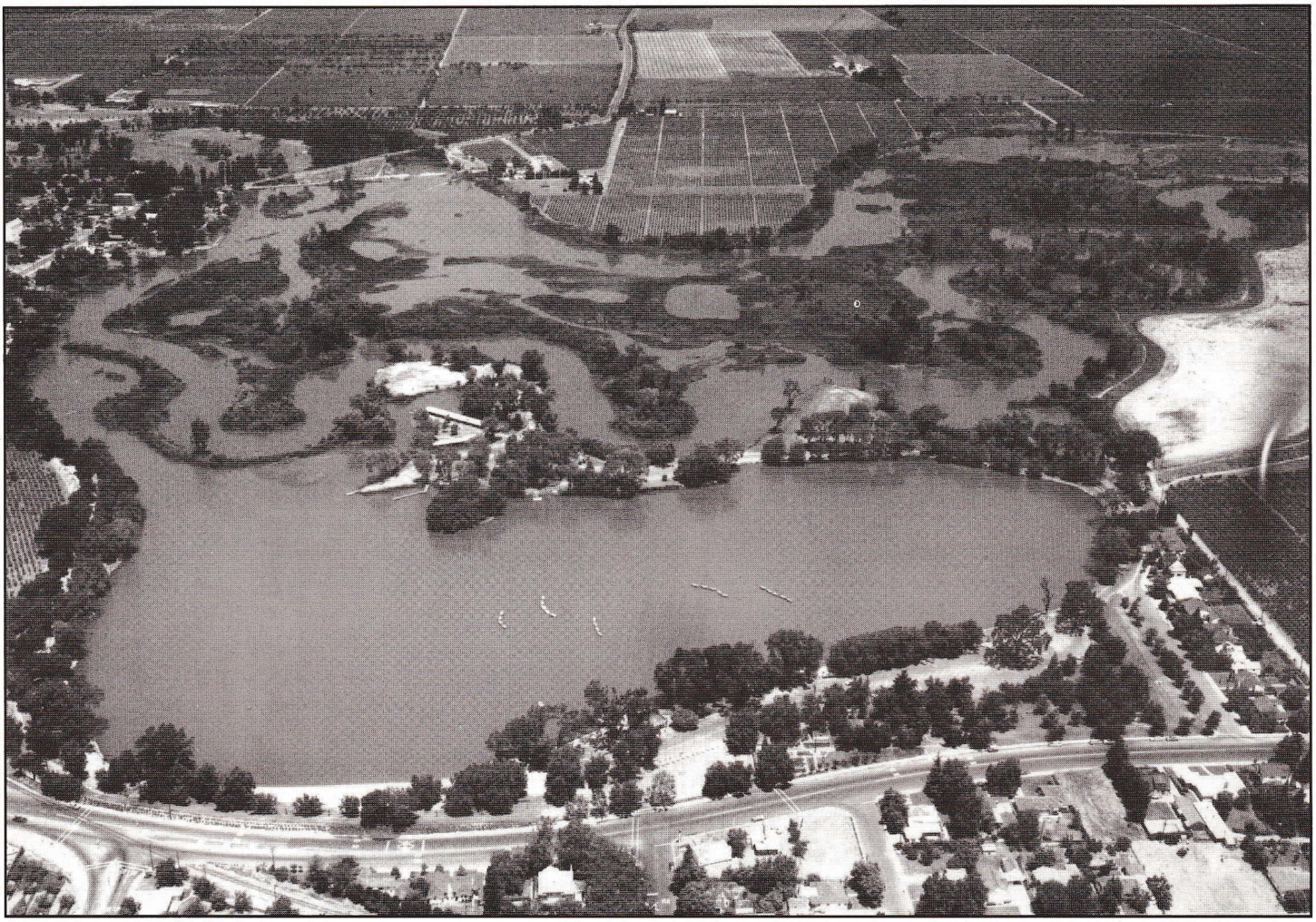
The same year a new fish ladder was constructed at Woodbridge Dam at a cost of $57,600. The fish ladder was destroyed during the floods of 1950.

▲ *Sandbagging the Mokelumne River at Woodbridge after a major flood on March 26, 1907.*

▲ *Woodbridge, November 26, 1950; Broken levee and washed out fish ladder.*



▲ *The remains of the 1891 dam fifty years later; current dam in the background.*



▲ *The lake of water behind the Woodbridge Irrigation Dam; Lodi Lake in foreground and Knights Lake in the upper right. Note: The open area to the right is now the Lodi Wilderness area.*

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The Woodbridge Irrigation District celebrated its 25th anniversary in May 1953 by retiring the last of the $325,000 in bond funding. J. E. Stewart was president of the board; S. W. Beckman, vice president; Frank Goldman and Elwood Stewart, directors; Carl Klenk, secretary; W. F. Woolley, engineer; Gilbert Jones, attorney; and Kenneth Welsh, superintendent.

Mrs. Mable Hall, succeeded Carl Klenk as secretary of the board, a job Mable presided over for many years.

The WID continued to make improvements by adding cement to the sides and bottom of its many canals and ditches. The 91 year task of adding boards to the dam in the spring and removing them in the fall may soon change with the construction of a permanent dam that will hold water in Lodi Lake the entire year.

REFERENCES & CREDITS

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Archives of the Woodbridge Irrigation District; aided by Superintendent Christiansen and Secretary Linda Podesto.

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Pictures from WID, San Joaquin County Historical Society and Ralph Lea.

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Archives of the San Joaquin County Historical Society, Debbie Mastel and staff.

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